

## SUBSTANCE ABUSE — INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION

### LESSON 1: MAKING CRITICAL DECISIONS ABOUT SUBSTANCES

#### INTRODUCTION

Obviously, all drug use is not bad. Drugs taken as prescribed by doctors or as indicated on over-the-counter drug packaging can help prevent and cure illnesses and relieve symptoms of illnesses. When taken under these circumstances and for these reasons, drugs are a useful tool in keeping people healthy. However, drugs should only be a small part of an individual's efforts to maintain wellness, since the best way to stay healthy is to maintain a healthy lifestyle. When people are healthy and feeling well both mentally and physically, they do not require drugs. So why do people misuse and abuse drugs when they do not need them?

Reasons for misusing and abusing drugs all have one thing in common — people depend on drugs to change the way they feel, instead of learning to change themselves or their behaviors to solve their problems or face new challenges. You do not need drugs to have a good time; there are many other longer lasting ways to feel good. You do not need drugs to relieve uncomfortable feelings; many other young people struggle with troubles and challenges much like your own. Even adults are often concerned with the same things you are. Many people, young and old, work to change the things that they do not like in their lives and learn to live with those aspects of their lives that they cannot change — all free of drugs. In fact, people who abuse drugs to avoid their problems are not able to solve them.

#### HOW USE DEVELOPS

Students are usually first tempted to smoke cigarettes and marijuana and drink alcohol at parties and other social occasions because of peer pressure and curiosity. From there, drug abuse may then progress in stages. These stages are:

1. Experimental use
2. Occasional use
3. Regular use
4. Multiple drug use
5. Total dependency

This progression of stages is not inevitable; it can be stopped at any stage although stopping becomes more difficult in later stages. The best way to prevent a problem with drugs is to simply not abuse them in the first place.



#### *Experimental Use*

Those who experiment with drugs may be more curious about a drug's effects than the drug's dangers. In the case of certain drugs, however, the dangers of addiction,

permanent psychological damage, or physical harm takes only one unlucky experiment. Drugs have different effects on different individuals who have no way of knowing what that effect may be. For some, trying a drug once can result in immediate addiction, serious injury to themselves or others, and even death. Remember, those who are now dependent started with experimentation, and they probably never thought that trying a drug once or twice would become an addiction. The many lives ruined by drugs prove that this can indeed happen.

### **DID YOU KNOW?**

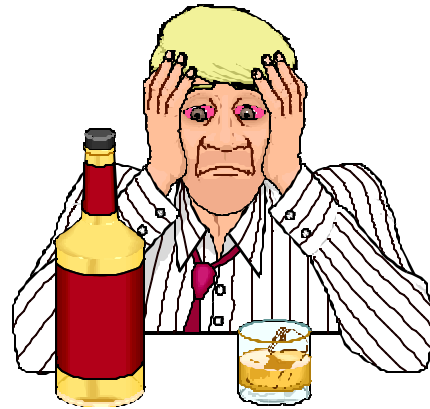
The chances that a first-time user of cocaine will become addicted are 1 in 6; the chances that a first-time user of crack will become addicted are 1 in 3; and 1 out of 10 drinkers becomes an alcoholic.

#### *Occasional Use*

For occasional drug users, drugs become a way of having a good time with friends in social situations. Using drugs while alone is still relatively uncommon. Drug use may become the major social activity of the group, so it is very easy for occasional use to turn into a regular habit.

#### *Regular Use*

Regular users take drugs to maintain a drugged feeling. Though they may deny it, these users are psychologically dependent on drugs. Drug use has become a regular part of their lifestyle, and although they continue to carry out their daily activities at home, school, or work, they are usually barely making it.



#### *Multiple Drug Use*

In many cases, once people try one drug and get comfortable taking it, they are more likely to feel comfortable trying other types of drugs. For example, after many young people give in to pressures to try marijuana, and if they continue to use it regularly, it is likely they will try other drugs as well. Unfortunately, as covered in the previous lesson, each drug produces different effects, and while users of one drug may know what to expect when they take it, another drug may be much more dangerous and affect them in a very different way.

#### *Total Dependency*

Dependent users rely on drugs physically as well as psychologically and will go to great lengths to get them. Without drugs, they experience severe physical and mental distress. Dependent users all started with experimental drug use. In many cases, as users grow more dependent on drugs, they crave new sensations and may try more than one drug at a time or different ways of taking a drug. Such habits multiply the risks of drug use. For example, people who start injecting drugs risk contracting diseases like AIDS through shared needles.

### *WHO'S AT RISK?*

Anyone has the potential to become dependent on substances, but some people seem to be more susceptible than others. Certain times in life may make someone more likely to try drugs for the first time or to use drugs to escape problems. People who are under a great amount of stress are more likely to use drugs; adolescence is a time of great stress and drugs are often readily available to young people. Young people who have family problems are more likely to use drugs, and those with low self-esteem run the risk of continuing to use drugs after “just trying” them to deal with peer pressure or bad feelings.

The best prevention is simply not to use drugs except as directed for medical reasons and not to drink alcohol until you are of legal age and then only moderately. Children of alcoholics should consider not drinking at all, even when reaching legal age, because their risk of alcoholism is much greater than that of children of non-alcoholics.

Remember, no matter how rough things may get, there are always alternatives to drug abuse, whether it is changing an uncomfortable situation, participating in a healthy activity you enjoy, or seeking counseling for problems you feel you cannot handle alone. While it may seem that drug abuse is very prevalent in the United States, it does not mean that it is normal.

### *What Is Normal, Anyway?*

While you may wonder what the term “normal” has to do with drugs, deciding what kind of behavior is “normal” in your life has a lot to do with whether or not you abuse drugs. Many young people are very concerned with being normal, which can mean different things in different situations to different peo-

ple. Behavior that is normal for one person may not be normal for another. What is normal in one group may be considered strange in another.

When you worry about how your clothes and hair look, if you are saying the right things, or if people will laugh at you for certain things, you are concerned with whether other people think you are normal. In fact, worrying about being normal *is* very normal. Young people, in particular, worry because they are experiencing so many changes in their lives. This acute awareness of “fitting in” usually decreases as you become an adult and gain a better sense of who you are. Your teenage years are a time for learning what is normal for you. It is not an easy process, so give some thought to the type of behavior you believe is normal.

Do not make the mistake of labeling your emotions as good or bad. You may not enjoy feeling angry, sad, or bored, but these are emotions that everyone has. They teach you about yourself. When you abuse drugs to escape these feelings, you are cheating yourself. Uncomfortable feelings are often messages that you need to change something in your life; look at them as feedback on how you think, act, and view your environment. They are for you to analyze and work with. They are normal.

What you consider normal is generally considered normal by your group of friends. You became friends because you have things in common. But what do you do if your friends want you to try drugs? Is it normal behavior to go along with the group? If what is standard for the group is not for you, then it is better for you not to be what the group considers normal.



If you could run faster than all the others in your group, you would not want to slow down just to be normal. The same goes for drugs. If you know that drugs hurt you, why use them to be considered normal? Why slow down with the crowd when you know you can win the race?

### LEGAL RISKS OF ILLEGAL DRUG USE



Before deciding to drink alcohol or abuse drugs, remember that abuse of legal drugs, taking illegal drugs, underage drinking, and driving while intoxicated are all against the law. By endangering their lives and the lives of others, users become a societal problem, often requiring legal punishment. Drug laws vary from state to state, but the general trend throughout the United States is toward stiffer penalties for those convicted of drug possession, drug selling, and alcohol-related car accidents. People convicted of these crimes must pay higher fines and must often spend time in jail. If you think trying drugs

might be a fun way to spend some time, think about how much fun you would have spending time in a prison.

### TURNING THE PRESSURE OFF

As a teenager, you have many new pressures in your life, as well as many new challenges and experiences. Along with these new opportunities come added responsibilities. While adjusting to these changes that are a part of becoming an adult, you are constantly making decisions. Sometimes you make good decisions and other times you may make mistakes. Making mistakes is normal in a good way because they are part of the learning process. Of course, nobody likes to make mistakes, so try to analyze each situation beforehand to minimize them.

When it comes to drugs, however, it is extremely important to make the right decision before you make a mistake; making just one wrong choice may be too late. Having to juggle pressures from your family, school, activities, job, and friends may overwhelm you at times. The many new situations and emotions you experience can sometimes seem unbearable with no end in sight. Unfortunately, drugs and people who use them and are willing to share them are readily available with what seems like a quick solution to all your problems.

Pressures from society, your family, friends, and yourself may sometimes make it difficult for you to say no to drugs. Our culture often encourages quick solutions to problems; many people would like to believe that taking a pill could cure all types of problems, but there is no magic pill to make it all better. Pills and other drugs only produce chemical reactions in your mind and body, which in turn create artificial feelings and unhealthy side effects.

Advertising, movies, and television often shows glamorize drug and alcohol abuse. It may appear that all the beautiful, fun people are drinking at a bar or taking a refreshing break with the “crisp, clean” smoke of a cigarette. These types of false messages reinforce the idea of drug abuse as a normal and desirable part of life. You may see your parents drink at parties; you may know students who use drugs; and you may be curious about drugs’ effects or tempted to use them to relieve uncomfortable emotions. Though all these situations may make drug abuse attractive to you, the reality of drugs’ effects are far from glamorous. The pleasure drugs give is short-lived and unreal. They never solve problems; only you can do that, and you cannot function if drugs are a problem in your life.

What you need is a plan of action to cope with all the pressures to abuse drugs. Once you decide that you do not want drugs to be a part of your life, you must develop strategies to resist these pressures as well as healthy alternatives to drugs.

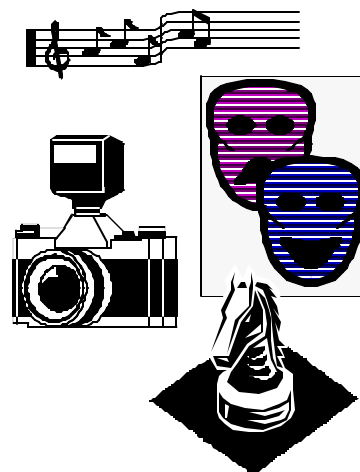
### HANDLING INTERNAL PRESSURES

1. *Accept and analyze your emotions.* If you are feeling something unpleasant, take time to consider the cause of your emotions instead of trying to avoid feeling bad. If you do not address the cause, the uncomfortable feelings will return to bother you. Also, remember that certain amounts of anger, sadness, boredom, and frustration are normal human responses to life that must be accepted.
2. *Seek out help when you feel overwhelmed.* Members of your family, teachers, counselors, and friends can help you. There are also many places that offer help for specific problems, like divorced parents, shyness, alcoholism, or lack of reading skills.

You can ask a counselor or instructor at school about them or look for yourself in the phone book. If you are willing to make the effort, there are people willing to help you. Seek them out.



3. *Find alternatives to drug use.* If your routine is a big yawn, take a look around and see if there is an activity that looks interesting to you. Photography, auto mechanics, painting, chess, drama, singing, playing an instrument, and part-time employment are among the many activities you could do that would add new challenges to an unexciting routine.



Of even greater importance, these activities pay you back with a real sense of accomplishment and heightened self-esteem as you get better and better at

them. Drugs cannot give you these benefits; they can only temporarily produce a false feeling of well-being. In the long run, drugs always take far more than they give and leave the user with nothing but problems.

4. *Release excess energy and learn how to relax.* If you cannot sit still in your seat during class, maybe you are not exercising your body enough. Physical activities such as running, walking, biking, tennis, basketball, weight training, martial arts, skiing, and dance, among others, keep your body in shape while relaxing and focusing your mind during mental activities.

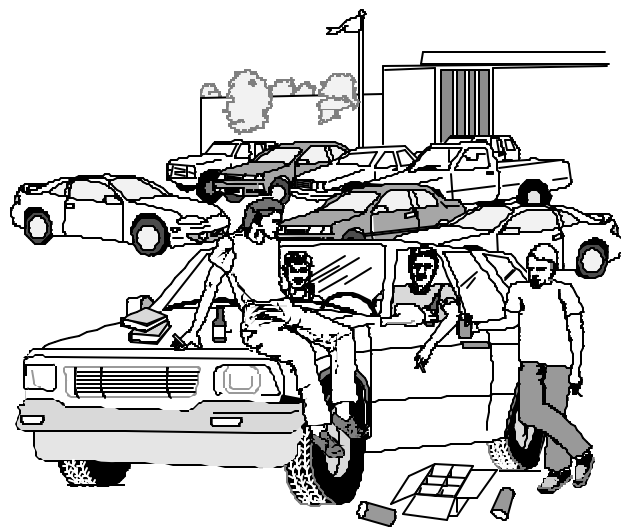


If you have problems relaxing, try the relaxation methods in the chapter on stress, such as meditation, deep breathing, and visualization techniques.

5. *Practice patience.* If there is a situation that makes you feel bad, you cannot think of a way to change it, and nothing you do seems to work, what can you do? *Wait!* You may not like that answer, since waiting is difficult, especially for young people. But there will be times in life when the situation is out of your control. This fact is understandably hard for young

people to accept. However, change is certain and inevitable. If you wait and stay alert, new solutions and opportunities will become available to you in time. To cope with the stress of a difficult situation until things do change, follow the tips in the chapter on stress. People on drugs never learn this lesson of waiting and miss opportunities to change their lives for the better.

### RESISTING EXTERNAL PRESSURES



1. *Learn how to refuse drugs effectively.* Standing up to peers when they want you to do something that you do not wish to do can be very difficult. When you go against the crowd, you risk rejection — and that is scary. However, every time you make a decision to do what is best for you and those you care about, you become a stronger person. You also gain the respect of those people who are your true friends. Your strength and your decisions may even give others the courage to do what is best for them as well. In today's school environment, saying no may not be easy, but it is definitely worth the effort.
2. *Prepare yourself for situations where you may be offered drugs.* Visualize different

circumstances and different behaviors you can use to refuse offers of drugs. Have answers ready, such as:

- No, thanks, I'd rather do something else.
- No, I already feel fine.
- No, thanks, I already have enough problems.
- No, I'm running in the meet tomorrow (interviewing for a job, taking an important test, acting in a play, etc.).
- No, thanks, I'll pass.
- No, I don't like the way it smells, tastes, makes me feel, etc.
- No, I'm not feeling too well and I don't want to get worse.
- *No!*

If you do not feel comfortable saying no in a situation, find a way to remove yourself from the scene. Suddenly remembering an appointment or some other excuse can get you away from the situation and give you time to think of another way of handling it next time. The important thing is not to do the drugs.

3. *Analyze media and advertising.* Is the image of drugs projected by advertising accurate? Who gains by making products appear glamorous and sophisticated? People who sell products want you to buy them and will use psychological techniques in advertising to create a demand for their goods. Companies that sell beer, cigarettes, and non-drug related products, such as cars, have one main goal — they want your money.

Your goal is to do what is best for you. Some products that advertising tries to sell you are opposed to that goal. Your defense against advertisements for products that are useless or harmful is the power to read between the lines of the

psychological game. Think about the message an ad is giving and decide for yourself whether it is accurate.

## CONCLUSION

Now that you have finished this lesson, you have a better understanding of drugs, their effects, their dangers, and the correct role they should play in a person's life. You have also learned the importance of remaining drug-free and ways to avoid the pressures to abuse drugs. Use your knowledge to make your life and the lives of those around you better. You do have the power to control much of the way your life turns out. Set an example — your actions do make a difference in the world.